The Chapel of St. Paul, and the beginnings of the Catholic Church in Minnesota /

FATHER GALTIER AND THE CHAPEL OF ST. PAUL. By Courtesy of Edward A. Bromley, from his “Photographic History of Early St. Paul” (1901).

THE CHAPEL OF ST. PAUL, AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN MINNESOTA.* BY REV. AMBROSE McNULTY.

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The first Christian temple in what is now Minnesota was built by two Jesuit missionaries. Michael Guignas and Nicholas De Gonnor, at the French trading post, Fort Beauharnois, on or near the plot now occupied by Villa Maria convent, Frontenac. This log chapel was ready for use at the end of October, 1727.

In October, 1841, Rev. Lucien Galtier erected the first Christian house of worship in the settlement destined to become St. Paul. This log chapel of St. Paul, on Bench street, was the second Catholic church in Minnesota, though for more than a year religious services were regularly held in dwellings at Fort Snelling and Mendota.

In the interval between the time of Guignas and the day of Galtier, the fortunes of war had made profound changes in the political aspect of the new world and of the old world. In 1727, when Jesuit missionaries came to evangelize the Indians of the unknown Northwest, imperial France, mistress of Canada and of the Mississippi, Catholic France, nursery of missionaries for all pagan lands, had reached the zenith of her power and of her glory in North America. When Galtier, son though he was of war-scourged France, landed at Fort Snelling in 1840, he came as a citizen by choice of the new republic of the West, whose

rising star of empire flashed a message of hope to the lovers of liberty throughout the world.

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On first thought it may seem strange that about eighty years should have intervened between the abandonment of the Frontenac Indian mission and the inauguration of the Catholic Church in embryonic St. Paul. However, it must be borne in mind that the overthrow of France in the new world left Catholic missions in the Northwest unprotected and untenable, and that the tide of immigration to the upper Mississippi was necessarily held in abeyance while the young republic of the United States was struggling a second time with England for the independence and territory won in the Revolutionary war.

In tracing the growth of St. Paul and Minnesota account must be taken of many agencies. Failure of crops and other misfortunes induced many of the Selkirk colonists on the Canadian border to seek homes in more propitious surroundings. Some of these refugees, following the Red river and the St. Peter or Minnesota, were among the first to settle about Fort Snelling. Soldiers of the fort, also, whose term of service had expired, took claims in the neighborhood. Soon straggling settlements began to form along the banks of the Mississippi. A cluster of cabins opposite the fort was called St. Peter's,—it has since become famous as Mendota.

VISIT BY BISHOP LORAS IN 1839.

When Bishop Loras, of Dubuque, in 1839, visited this part of his vast diocese, he estimated the number of Catholics at and about Fort Snelling at 185. His enumeration was probably far in excess of the number of actual residents. Mathias Loras came to America in response to an appeal of Bishop Portier, of Mobile, then in France asking for missionaries for his southern diocese. Father Loras labored faithfully for seven years in Alabama, rising to the office of Vicar General. In 1837 he was appointed bishop of the newly formed diocese of Dubuque, in which was comprised the territory of Iowa and all of

Minnesota and the Dakotas between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. On his elevation to the bishopric of Dubuque, Bishop Loras in his turn immediately went to France in quest of priests for his distant diocese. Returning to America in the winter of 1838, he brought with him, among others, Joseph Cretin, A. Pelamourgnes, Lucien Galtier, and Augustine Ravoux. He arrived in Dubuque April 19th, 1839. Two months later he 235 was setting out for Fort Snelling. This visit is described in the following letter, written at Dubuque in July, 1839.

I have just returned from St. Peter's [Mendota], where I made my second mission, or episcopal visitation. Though it lasted only a month, it has been crowned with success. I left Dubuque on the 23d of June, on board a large and magnificent steam vessel, and was accompanied by Father Pelamourgues and a young man who served as interpreter with the Sioux. After a successful voyage of some days along the superb Mississippi, we reached St. Peter's. Our arrival was a cause of great joy to the Catholics, who had never before seen a priest or bishop in those remote regions. They manifested a great desire to assist at divine worship and to approach the sacraments of the Church. The wife of our host was baptized and confirmed; she subsequently received the sacrament of matrimony. The Catholics of St. Peter's amount to 185, fifty-six of whom we baptized, administered confirmation to eight, communion to thirty-three adults, and gave the nuptial blessing to four couples.

Arrangements have been made for the construction of a church next summer, and a clergyman is to be sent when he is able to speak French (which is the language of the majority), English, and the Sioux. To facilitate the study of the latter we are to have at Dubuque this winter two young Sioux, who are to teach one or two of our young ecclesiastics.

GALTIER, THE FIRST PRIEST.

When navigation opened the following spring, Bishop Loras fulfilled his promise of sending a priest to Fort Snelling. The Rev. Lucien Galtier, one of the young levites brought from France, was selected for the upper Mississippi post. Father Galtier was a man of remarkable personality and power; he had the face of a Cæsar and the heart of a Madonna; in him strength and tenderness, culture and simplicity, met and mingled in the formation of a noble character. If he had remained in France, his talents and his virtues would have marked him for high honors, but he preferred the rugged lot and privations of pioneer life to the power and fame for which petty men strive. He served the missions of Mendota and St. Paul for four years, thence going directly to Keokuk, Iowa, and afterward to Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, where he labored zealously for the Master from 1849 until he was called to his reward in 1866.

Such was Galtier, the founder of the chapel of St. Paul, from which our city received its name, about which our great metropolis grew as some medieval cathedral might lift its massive shoulders and huge frame about its lowly sanctuary. If 236 some day the angel of history shall touch the mystic chords of memory in a grateful generation and a shaft shall rise towards heaven in commemoration of the builder of the first Christian temple of St. Paul, let it bear the simple legend: “Galtier, the Father of St. Paul.”

Father Galtier in his own modest style shall tell the story of his coming to Minnesota and of his labors in what was then the *Ultima Thule* of our young commonwealth. Your imagination will paint the wild and forbidding background of the picture sketched by his words, addressed to Bishop Loras from Prairie du Chien on the 14th day of January, 1864.

On the 20th day of April, 1840, in the afternoon, a St. Louis steamboat, the first of the season, arrived at Dubuque, bound for St. Peter's and Fort Snelling. Right Reverend Dr. Loras immediately came to me and told me that he desired to send me towards the upper waters of the Mississippi. There was no St. Paul at that time; there was on the site of the

present city but a single log house, occupied by a man named Phelan, and the steamboats never stopped there.

The boat landed at the foot of Fort Snelling, then garrisoned by a few regular soldiers, under command of Major Plimpton. The sight of the fort, commanding from the elevated promontory the two rivers, the Mississippi and the St. Peter, pleased me; but the discovery which I soon made that there were only a few houses on the St. Peter side, and but two on the side of the fort, surrounded by a complete wilderness, without any signs of fields under tillage, gave me to understand that henceforth my mission and life must be a career of privation, hard trials, and suffering, and would require of me patience, labor, and resignation. I had before me, under my charge, a large territorial district, but few souls to watch over. I introduced myself to Mr. Campbell, a Scotch gentleman, the Indian interpreter, to whom I was recommended by the Bishop. At his house I received a kind welcome from his good Christian wife, a charitable. Catholic woman. For about a month I remained there as one of the family. But, although well treated by all the members of the house. I did not, while thus living, feel sufficiently free to discharge my pastoral duties, so I obtained a separate room for my own use and made of it a kitchen, a parlor, and a chapel. Out of some boards I built a little altar, which was open in rime of service, and during the balance of the day was folded up and concealed by drapery.

In that precarious and somewhat difficult position I continued for over a year. On the Fort Snelling side I had under my charge, besides some soldiers, six families—Resche, Papin, Quinn, Campbell, Bruce, and Resico; and on the St. Peter side, besides some unmarried men in the employ of the company, five families—Faribault, Martin, Lord, and two Turpins. . ..

A circumstance rather bad in itself commenced to better my situation by procuring for me a new station and a change in my field of 237 labor. Some families who had left the Red River settlement, British America, on account of the floods and loss of the crop in the years 1837—38, had located themselves all along the bank of the Mississippi opposite the fort.

Unfortunately some soldiers crossed the river now and then to the houses of these settlers and returned intoxicated, sometimes remaining out a day or two or more without reporting to their quarters. Consequently a deputy marshal from Prairie du Chien was ordered to remove the houses. He went to work, assisted by some soldiers, and, one after another, unroofed the cottages, extending about five miles along the river. The settlers were forced to seek new homes.

A new settlement was formed about two miles below the cave, composed of those emigrants from the Red river and others. There were Rondo, who purchased the only cultivated piece of ground in the place, Phelan's old claim, Vital Guerin, Gervais and his brother, etc. I had to visit occasionally these forsaken families. It became necessary to choose a suitable spot for a church. Three points were offered, one called La Pointe Basse, or Pointe Leclair (now on account of a sand bar in its vicinity commonly known as Pig's Eye bar). I objected to that place; it was the extreme end of the settlement, and being low ground was exposed in high water to inundation. The idea of having the church swept down towards St. Louis one day did not please me. Two and one-half miles farther up, on his elevated claim, a Catholic named Charles Monsseau offered me an acre of his ground; but neither did this place suit my purpose. I was truly looking ahead to the future as well as seeing to the present time. Seamboats could not stop there; the bank was too steep, and the space on the summit was too narrow, and communication difficult with the places of the other settlers up and down the river.

After mature reflection several persons asked me to put up the church as near as possible to the cave, it being more convenient for me on my way from St. Peter's to cross the river at this point, and that place being the nearest point to the head of navigation outside the reservation line. Messrs. B. Gervais and Vital Guerin, two good, quiet farmers, owned the only spot that appeared likely to suit. They both consented to give the ground necessary for a church, a garden, and a small graveyard. I accepted the extreme eastern part of Mr. Vital's claim and the extreme west of Mr. Gervais’. In the month of October, 1841, I had on the above stated place logs cut and prepared, and soon a poor log church that would

well remind one of the stable of Bethlehem was built. The nucleus of St. Paul was formed. On November 1st, I blessed the new basilica, smaller, indeed, than the Basilica of St. Paul in Rome, but as well adapted as the latter for prayer and love to arise therein from pious hearts.

THE FIRST CHAPEL.

The first site urged upon Father Galtier was probably not far from where Father Hennepin and his Dakota captors debarked 238 at the end of April, 1680, to begin their overland journey to the Indian village at Mille Lacs. Father Galtier wisely decided that the ground there was dangerously low, and that the second, or Dayton's Bluff site, on the other hand, was inaccessibly high. The only available location remaining was the plot between Bench and Third streets and between Minnesota and Cedar streets. This was chosen, and in October, 1841, eight men accepted as a labor of love the task of erecting the first house of worship in their new home. The honored names of the builders are: Isaac Labissonniere, Joseph Labissonniere, the two Pierre Gervais, Pierre Bottineau, Charles Bottineau, Francois Morin, and Vital Guerin.

The only survivor of those who built the original chapel is Isaac Labissonniere, who resides in this city at 575 Canada street. Though nearly eighty years of age, his mind is remarkably keen and his memory surprisingly clear. Mr. Labissonniere was born in Pembina, N. D., in 1823; he came to St. Paul in 1837. In 1852 he removed to Osseo, in Hennepin county, and returned to St. Paul in 1902. I give the substance of several interviews with the old gentleman:

I remember Well the circumstances attending the building of the log chapel in 1841. Perhaps by general consent rather than the appointment of Father Galtier, my father held the office of general superintendent of the building. Eight of us at first volunteered for the work; others offered themselves later.

The ground selected for the site of the church was thinly covered with groves of red oak and white oak. Where the cathedral stands was then a tamarack swamp. The logs for the chapel were cut on the spot, and the tamarack swamp in the rear was made to contribute rafters and roof pieces. We had poor building tools in those days, and our work was not beautifully finished. The logs, rough and undressed, prepared merely by the ax, were made secure by wooden pins. The roof was made of steeply slanting bark-covered slabs, donated by a mill-owner of Stillwater. The slabs were carried to St. Paul by a steamboat, the captain accepting in payment a few days' service of one of the men. These slabs were landed at Jackson street, and were drawn up the hill by hand with ropes. The slabs were likewise put to good use in the construction of the floor and of the benches.

The chapel, as I remember it, was about twenty-five feet long, eighteen feet wide, and ten feet high. It had a single window on each side and it faced the river. It was completed in a few days, and could not have represented an expenditure in labor value of more than $65.

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Mr. Labissonniere's description of the old church agrees essentially with Monsignor Ravoux's expressed views, and it may be accepted as sufficiently accurate.

Such was the Galtier chapel, as, amidst trees and tangled growths, it stood with unshaven sides, steep roof, and simple cross, crowning the brow of the nascent city. Such it was on the first of November, 1841, when it was solemnly dedicated to the worship of God.

On that memorable day, it admitted within its hallowed precincts Swiss watchmakers now trying to coax a pittance from an unaccustomed soil, voyageurs who seemed to make a romance of poverty and trial, *coureurs de bois* who still wore some rags of the civilization of better days, adventuresome seekers of furs and fortune, sons of France and Erin, who are always to be found at the outposts of civilization, and silent Sioux, who yet remembered the Black-gown's story of the cross. Could any one of this motley group of worshippers, gazing into the future, have dreamed of the meaning and the promise of

the simple ceremony just witnessed in the “Bethlehem” of the Northwest? It was, in fact, not only the local inauguration of the universal Church, but the founding of a great city destined to create and guide the destinies of a vast commonwealth.

The passing of the name, St. Paul, from the church which was the nucleus of the future city to the settlement itself, is described as follows by Father Galtier in the letter already quoted.

The church was thus dedicated to St. Paul, and I expressed a wish that the settlement should be known by no other name. I succeeded in this. I had previously to this time fixed my residence at St. Peter, and as the name of St. Paul is generally connected with that of St. Peter, and the Gentiles being well represented in the new place in the persons of Indians, I called it St. Paul's. . ..

The name of St. Paul, applied to a town or city, seemed appropriate. The monosyllable is short, sounds well, is understood by all denominations. Hence, when later an attempt was made to change the name of the place, I opposed the vain project, even by writing from Prairie du Chien. When Mr. Vital [Guerin] was married, I published the bans as being those of a resident of St. Paul. An American named Jackson put up a store, and a grocery was opened at the foot of the Gervais claim. This soon caused steamboats to land there; henceforward the place was known as St. Paul landing.

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The only other event of note, after the dedication, in the recorded history of the chapel, previous to its enlargement in 1847, was an official visitation and the administration of confirmation by Bishop Loras on the fifth day of June, 1842.

FATHER RAVOUX.

Our sketch now brings us to a venerable figure among us, the patriarch of the Church in Minnesota, the living link between the luxurious present and the pioneer past, the noblest

Roman of them all, Augustine Ravoux. Commissioned by Loras in August, 1841, as missionary plenipotentiary among the Sioux, he devoted himself with marvelous success to that work till he was compelled to take the post left vacant by the withdrawal of Father Galtier in 1844. From that date until the coming of Bishop Cretin, in 1851, he was the only priest in Minnesota, “the lonely sentinel of Rome on the banks of the upper Mississippi.” Father Ravoux divided his time between Mendota and St. Paul, giving two Sundays to the former to the one in St. Paul, until in 1849 it was necessary to reverse the order of attendance, as Mendota was falling hopelessly behind her young sister village in point of population.

In his “Reminiscences and Memoirs.” page 59, Father Ravoux says: “In 1847 we had to make an addition to the chapel of St. Paul, erected by the Rev. Father Galtier in 1841. The small chapel used by the Sisters of St. Joseph, till their removal to St. Joseph's academy, formed the addition.”

On page 62 of the same book is the following item about the church to which Bishop Cretin was introduced in 1851: “And the cathedral, the chapel described above, was a log building about forty-five feet long by eighteen wide.” The addition, therefore, put up by Father Ravoux, was eighteen by about twenty feet. These figures seem to correspond with Monsignor Ravoux's map recently published. The old chapel was shingled and otherwise repaired to make it conform to the part added in 1847.

It is worthy of mention that the bell of the “Argo,” a steamer which sunk in the Mississippi in the autumn of 1847, was presented to Father Ravoux by the Hon. Henry M. Rice. It was installed in a little belfry beside the chapel in the winter of 241 1847–8. This was the first mounted bell dedicated to the use of any church or school in Minnesota.

PICTURES OF the CHAPEL.

So far as reaching a satisfactory conclusion is concerned, the most difficult point with which this paper has to deal is whether the pictures commonly called the “First Chapel of

St. Paul" represent really the old building, or merely the addition of 1847, or in some way a combination of both. Monsignor Ravoux contends that the painting by Alexis Fournier in 1888 (presented by Mr. James J. Hill to this Historical Society) shows only his addition. His argument is supported by the apparent dimensions of the structure, and by the further fact that the two windows appear to have been in the original plan of the designer.

Against this view is the rough appearance of the logs, showing only here and there a touch of the axe on the outer surface; the popular belief of the pioneer sisters and old priests, like Monsignor Oster, who never doubted that the Fournier sketch was the first chapel; and, above all, the daguerreotypes taken before and after 1853, which show the cross and main entrance at the south end of the chapel, whereas the addition admittedly faced north, toward Third street. The "Nucleus" lithograph, published by J. E. Whitney and William G. Le Duc in 1853, showing a nearly square building with only one window on the side and entitling it "Nucleus of St. Paul," is the same as the front part of the Fournier painting. The Original daguerreotype of the chapel, which was followed in the painting, was made in 1854, according to Edward A. Bromley in his "Photographic History of Early St. Paul," 1901. An enlarged photographic copy of it is displayed in the rooms of this Historical Society.

The Directory of the city of St. Paul for 1856–7, published by Goodrich & Somers, January, 1857, reproduced the commonly accepted picture, similar to the painting by Fournier, and called it "the first building erected for public purposes." "Our fellow citizen," the Directory continued, "J. E. Whitney, daguerreotyped the building as it stood until 1855, and has kindly permitted us to use the following engraving prepared from the 16 242 same." If that picture, made at a time when the Galtier building was fresh in the minds of all, was not at all a representation of the old building, is it not passing strange that the error was not corrected with haste and vigor?

In all probability, the Fournier painting shows the old building and a small section of the '47 addition, the camera in the first instance taking only part of the church as it stood in 1854.

We therefore conclude that the “Nucleus” picture, in everything except the new roof added in 1847, is an accurate portrayal of the first chapel of St. Paul.

BISHOP CRETIN.

The next and most important event in the life of the chapel was the installation of the Right Rev. Joseph Cretin as bishop of St. Paul, July 2, 1851. Of this the “Minnesota Democrat,” of July 8, 1851, says:

The coming of the bishop to this place was hailed with considerable enthusiasm by our Catholic fellow citizens. In the evening large numbers assembled in the log chapel on the bluff to see him and hear his voice. Religious ceremonies appropriate to the church were performed. The Te Deum and the Magnificat were chanted, and the bishop addressed the congregation both in English and in French.

The services closed with the bishop's benediction on the congregation. Those who know the bishop well, and of different sects represent him as a highly educated and excellent man, an American in all his sympathies, and warmly attached to the free institutions of our country.

LATER CATHEDRALS.

Of Bishop Cretin and the second cathedral Monsignor Ravoux says, on page 63 of his Memoirs: “Before the lapse of five months after his arrival in St. Paul, he had erected on block seven, in St. Paul proper [Wabasha and Sixth streets], a brick building eighty-four feet long by forty-four feet wide, three stories and a half high, including the basement. This building became immediately the second cathedral of St. Paul, and also the second residence of the Rt. Rev. Bishop, of his priests and seminarians; and a few months after, some apartments of the basement were used as school rooms for boys.”

This brick house on Wabasha street served as the cathedral until the present stone building on St. Peter and Sixth streets was opened for services, June 13, 1858. Excavation for the third cathedral of St. Paul was begun in 1854, and its corner 243 stone was laid by Monsignor Timon, bishop of Buffalo, N. Y., in 1856.

Bishop Cretin did not live to see the new cathedral finished, —to Monsignor Ravoux belongs the credit of having erected that building. To Bishop Cretin, first bishop and father of the diocese of St. Paul, who died February 22nd, 1857, may be traced many of the projects which have brought about the marvelous development of the Catholic church in Minnesota.

THE FIRST SISTERS.

What became of the old log church on Bench street? When the brick church on Wabasha street was opened, in November, 1851, the old church was turned over to the Sisters of St. Joseph, whom the bishop had called from St. Louis for school work. It was used by the sisters for one purpose or another from 1851 to 1863. If time permitted, many a droll and touching tale might be told of the experiences of these pioneer nuns, the first Catholic teachers in St. Paul.

Four made up the first colony, viz.: Mother St. John Fournier, of France; Sister M. Philomene, of France; Sister M. Scholastic Valasquez, of St. Louis; and Sister Frances Joseph Ivory, of Loretto, Pa. In the notes preserved by the Sisters of St. Joseph is the following reference to the trip of the intrepid four from St. Louis to St. Paul: “Major Fridley and his family were on the boat. The major, who was agent for the Chippewa Indians, was always trying to impress upon the minds of the other passengers this fact—that St. Paul was really a very nice place, though new and a little wild. ‘Yes,’ he would say, ‘a little wild.’”

The nuns arrived in St. Paul November 2nd, 1851, and they opened their school in the vestry of the old church on the 10th of the same month. The sisters lived in the old shanty,

eighteen feet square and one story high, which had served as the episcopal palace. The house was heated by a stove, an opening in the roof permitting the pipes to pass out and the cold air to pass in. A diary of the sisters says:

While preparing the vestry for a school room the sisters noticed several openings in the logs, through which daylight could be seen; they knew that through these same openings cold air could enter, and therefore they called on the pupils for old newspapers, with which they hoped to exclude both the one and the other. Wednesday afternoon, their first 244 half-holiday, was devoted to stopping up the drinks by forcing folded paper into them. Then the artistic powers of teachers and pupils were taxed to decorate the walls and the stuffed crevices.

On the first day of the school fourteen pupils were enrolled. The number so increased that, as the records quoted above inform us, early in April, 1852, the pupils were crowded out of the vestry “into the old log church that had been fitted up for a school.” In the spring and summer of 1852 a two-story brick school, 42 by 21 feet, was erected for the sisters. The new school was connected by a corridor-like frame structure with the old shanty which had been their first dwelling place. When the school was removed from the log church, it was restored to its original purpose and remained the sisters' chapel until they vacated Bench street.

THE FIRST HOSPITAL.

In 1853 Bishop Cretin decided to build a hospital. Hon. Henry M. Rice donated land for the purpose, and in 1854 St. Joseph's hospital was completed. The original building was only the central part of modern St. Joseph's. In 1854 the cholera was brought to St. Paul by boatmen, and as the new hospital was not ready, the indispensable old church was turned into a temporary hospital, reverting again on the subsidence of the epidemic to use as a chapel.

In 1859, on the arrival of Bishop Grace, the sisters' school, or St. Joseph's academy, was transferred to the hospital building on Exchange street, and the hospital was removed to Bench street. So matters stood until the sisters, on the last day of July, 1863, took possession of the nucleus of their buildings on Nelson and Western avenues.

RELICS OF THE OLD CHAPEL.

The old log church, or what remained of it, was then in a dilapidated condition. It was the intention of Bishop Grace to have the old chapel rebuilt and preserved as a relic on the grounds of St. Joseph's academy. For that purpose he had the logs removed there, but the men at work on the academy, not knowing what the logs were for, burnt them to warm their hands or their coffee.

Out of the fragments of one of these logs that escaped destruction Bishop Grace had two gavels made. One of these was 245 presented to the Minnesota Historical Society, and the other was kept at the Cathedral. Unfortunately both have disappeared—the last remnants of the log chapel of St. Paul.

The old log chapel has disappeared, but its noble offshoots remain: the city which from it took its origin and its name; the Catholic Church in Minnesota, which traces to its humble door the splendid story of its growth. The civil and ecclesiastical commonwealths in the Northwest shared the same cradle, the struggles of primitive times, and the triumphs of later days. Working harmoniously in the future as in the past, may these two forces develop on the favored soil of Minnesota the flower of American citizenship.